

1.29.2008 - Rahall Introduces Mon Forest Wilderness Bill to Keep West Virginia â€˜Wild and Wonderful

In an effort to ensure that some of the Monongahela National Forest's most wild places remain available for hunting, fishing and hiking, U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV), Chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, today introduced legislation to designate seven parcels of federal land within the forest as wilderness. Joining him in sponsoring the measure are his fellow West Virginians, U.S. Reps. Alan Mollohan and Shelley Moore Capito.

"This legislation is about the heart and soul of West Virginia. Our southern mountains have been yielding their coal for generations and our northern ridge lines are being targeted by the merchants of wind power. More development is coming, and, in most cases, it is welcomed," Rahall said.

He continued, "But as West Virginians, we are intimately connected to our land. Our roots are planted deep in our misty hollers and our majestic mountains. We know that we will be judged by future generations on our stewardship of this land that is West Virginia. So I believe that it is of paramount importance that we, once again, set aside some of God's handiwork in our forests by preserving these federal lands in their pristine state."

The legislation - Wild Monongahela: A National Legacy for West Virginia's Special Places - would expand three existing federal wilderness areas within the Monongahela National Forest and establish four new ones. All of the new areas are currently managed by the Forest Service as wilderness, emphasizing non-motorized settings and a natural environment. The bill would make this type of management permanent.

The forest currently is the home of five federally designated wilderness areas comprising 78,041 acres: Otter Creek, Dolly Sods, Laurel Fork North and South, and the Cranberry Wilderness.

As part of a revision of the Forest Plan, completed in 2006, 18 roadless areas were evaluated for potential wilderness designation. The West Virginia House Delegation selected seven of these areas to include in the bill.

The seven areas are:

-
Big Draft:
A 5,242-acre area in the southern tip of the forest, located about five miles from White Sulphur Springs, offering excellent trout and rock bass fishing.

-
Cheat Mountain:
Comprised of 7,955 acres, it includes the High Falls of the Cheat, a major waterfall and favorite destination of hikers and excursion train visitors.

-
Cranberry Expansion: A proposed 12,032-acre addition to the highly popular Cranberry Wilderness; the expansion is located between the Williams River on the North and the Cranberry River on the South and West.

-
Dolly Sods Expansion: A 7,215-acre expansion to the well-known and popular Dolly Sods wilderness area, featuring unusual bog land, provides outstanding views across the Canaan Valley Wildlife Refuge.

-
Dry Fork Expansion: A small 740-acre expansion of the Otter Creek Wilderness area, which would occupy the northern and eastern flanks of McGowan Mountain leading down to the Dry Fork of the Cheat River and is home to whitewater recreation and trout fishing.

- Roaring Plains West: A 6,820-acre remote backcountry area located southwest of Dolly Sods, which ranges in elevation from 3,700 feet to over 4,700 feet and features exceptional views and space for solitude.

-

Spice Run:

A proposed 7,124-acre new wilderness area, which rises from the Greenbrier River on its western boundary and constitutes one of the most remote places in the State.

Established in 1920, the forest - a major recreational resource and host to an estimated 3 million visitors annually - is today comprised of over 919,000 acres of federal land in 10 counties of the eastern portion of West Virginia.

"These lands are our birthright - they are where we hunt and fish and seek peace - and we owe it to ourselves and to future generations to preserve them as the 'wild and wonderful' places that God granted to West Virginians," Rahall said.

New wilderness has received support from a wide range of West Virginia organizations, including the West Virginia AFL-CIO, the West Virginia Council of Churches, various West Virginia chapters of Trout Unlimited, the Greenbrier County Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Pocahontas County Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Fayette County Commission.